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The importance of homework in determining immigrant students' grades in schools in the USA context

Hee Jin Bang^{a,*}, Carola Suárez-Orozco^b, Juliana Pakes^c and Erin O'Connor^a

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Background: While a significant body of research has addressed teachers' evaluations of mainstream English speaking students, there is a dearth of such research focusing on immigrant adolescents. As many immigrant students are in the process of acquiring English language proficiency, evaluating and assigning grades to immigrant youth can pose particular challenges. Grades assigned for oral or written products may underestimate English language learners' knowledge, content skills or achievement. Conversely, relying excessively on effort or class behaviour rather than actual academic performance may inflate immigrant students' grades.

Purpose: We examined the extent to which immigrant students' academic achievement indicated by grades is attributable to factors such as English language proficiency, course understanding, classroom behaviours and homework completion. We then examined whether the effect of homework completion on grades varied as a function of English proficiency. In addition, we examined the factors contributing to teachers' evaluation of immigrant students' level of course understanding. Lastly, we investigated whether the effect of homework completion on course understanding varied as a function of English proficiency.

Sample: This study examined the final year (2002) data of the five-year Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study. At the start of the original study, the participants were recently arrived immigrant youth (ages 9–14) from Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua), China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Mexico; they were recruited from seven public school districts in the USA in Massachusetts and California. The present study was a secondary analysis of a subset of final year LISA data, involving data from 273 students and 57 teachers.

Methods: Using data collected through structured student interviews and behaviour checklists completed by teachers, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses to identify the factors that contributed significantly to immigrant students' grades and to their course understanding. Further regression analyses were conducted to determine whether English language proficiency was a moderating variable on immigrant students' grades and their level of understanding in a course.

Results: There were four main findings. Firstly, the regression results indicated that homework completion and English language proficiency had significant impact on class grades. Secondly, the effect of homework completion on grades was not moderated by students' English proficiency. Thirdly, immigrant students' class behaviours, English proficiency and homework completion largely

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determined teacher evaluations of students' course understanding. Fourthly, the effect of homework completion on teacher evaluations of students' course understanding was moderated by English proficiency. For students with high English language proficiency, completing homework significantly affected teacher assessments of their course understanding. For students with low English language proficiency, however, completing homework had relatively little effect on teacher assessments of their course understanding.

Conclusions: In this exploratory study, grades assigned to immigrant students were largely determined by whether they do their homework and their English language proficiency. Teacher evaluations of immigrant students' level of course understanding were largely determined by students' class behaviours, English language proficiency and homework completion. It is suggested that teachers distinguish between effort and skill and provide separate feedback for each of these dimensions during the process that newcomer immigrant students are concurrently acquiring academic skills while mastering a new language. However, further investigation is needed to determine the generalisability of findings to a larger immigrant youth population.

Keywords: immigrants; homework; teacher evaluations; English language proficiency

Introduction

Students expect that the grades they receive from teachers will be based on their understanding and mastery of the course material. In practice, however, grades are affected by multiple factors other than the teachers' assessment of the student's degree of understanding or mastery of the course material. Specifically, previous research indicates that a student's grade is also a reflection of teachers' observation of the student's behaviour, the student's relationships with peers and the teacher, the teacher's perceptions of the student's ability and his/her expectations about the quality of the student's work, the student's language skills, and other personal characteristics of the student such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status (Brophy 1983). While extensive evidence exists on the assessment and evaluation of mainstream English-speaking students, research on teachers' evaluations of immigrant adolescents is scarce. This paper attempts to address this gap in the literature.

Immigrant students – a fast growing student population (Hernández, Denton and Macartney 2007) – present a particular challenge for grading as many are in the process of acquiring a new language. An immigrant student's low performance may be less a result of their content knowledge and skill than their limited proficiency in the new language (e.g. Genesee et al. 2006). They may be shy in expressing themselves in class discussions, may have trouble distinguishing nuanced differences in multiple-choice tests and have problems expressing complex thoughts in an essay (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova 2008). Basing grades assigned to immigrant students solely on the products of their oral or written work unfairly penalises them (e.g. Greene 1998; Willig 1985), and may be an under-estimation of their achievement.

Occasionally, teachers may decide that some students' limited proficiency in the new language unduly affects their ability to produce the quality of work that would be expected of motivated, hard-working students, and thus, develop an alternative system of assessment. They may justifiably seek to base the grades of immigrant students partly on other factors, such as effort, participation, attendance, classroom behaviours, as well as relations with peers and teachers, as a means of distinguishing high- or low-achieving students (Brookhart 1994).

To achieve an enhanced understanding of teachers' evaluations of immigrant students, the current study examines associations between grades, classroom behaviours, homework completion, and skills pertaining to language, and course understanding using data from the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova 2008). In particular, it identifies the factors that impact teachers' grading or evaluations of immigrant students.

Theoretical frameworks informing the study

Effects of family background

We concur with Boudon (1974) that differences in students' academic achievement is attributable, in part, to both primary as well secondary effects of family background characteristics such as socio-economic status, maternal education, parental employment and family structure (Boudon 1974, as cited in Van de Werfhorst and Van Tubergen 2007). Boudon argued that the primary effects of social class are a result of the economic and human resources shaping children's developmental and academic outcomes, and lead to differentiated performance on educational outcome indicators such as standardised tests. In turn, based on their initial performance on these indicators of achievement, children are often placed by school administrators into certain programmes or tracks of classes; furthermore, students from more advantaged backgrounds tend to choose more academically rigorous schools and prestigious career paths than their peers from relatively less advantaged backgrounds. These secondary tracking effects have consequences on teacher expectancies of students, which in turn, have been demonstrated to shape student academic self-efficacy and performance (Weinstein 2002).

Contribution of ability and effort to grades

There are many variations in grading practices between teachers within and between schools, districts and states, but generally, grades assigned by teachers are closely linked to students' achievement levels (Wendel and Anderson 1994). In determining grades, however, teachers may take into consideration factors other than achievement as demonstrated through students' performance on tests and quizzes, such as effort, class participation, attitude and classroom behaviour. Thus, we assume a theoretical model of academic achievement developed by DiPerna and Elliott (1999, 2000) in which the outcome is determined by two types of student characteristics: academic skills and academic enablers. Academic skills are the main focus of instruction in primary and secondary schools, and they can be categorised into language-based skills, mathematics and critical thinking domains (DiPerna and Elliott 2002). Academic enablers include motivation, engagement, interpersonal skills and study skills (DiPerna and Elliott 2002). Both components are thought to contribute to academic competence. Grades, therefore, indicate not only the extent to which students have acquired the knowledge and skills of a course, but also their behaviour and compliance with classroom rules (Brookhart 1994; Cross and Frary 1999). This theory is particularly pertinent in the case of immigrant students who are learning a new language, as grades assigned for oral or written products may underestimate their knowledge or achievement. In order not to penalise students for

their developing new language skills, teachers may give relatively greater weight to students' academic behaviours in assigning grades.

The present study contributes to the understanding of the extent to which immigrant students' class grades are predicted by not only factors associated with students' family background, but also by indicators of skills versus indicators of effort. It also examines whether the level of academic skills and English proficiency impact immigrant students' ability to complete homework. The following section provides a brief review of relevant research on the factors influencing grades and the key constructs of our theoretical frameworks.

Literature

Grading practices

Grade point average generally determines whether students are high- or low-achieving, whether they receive recognition for academic performance, and in some schools, whether they can enrol in advanced courses. Grades are therefore important measures of academic outcome, and they carry considerable weight in indicating student achievement.

Since grades are important indicators of academic outcome, the wide variation entailed in grading practices should be recognised. Teachers use a variety of methods to determine students' grades (Frary, Cross and Weber 1993), and a study by Brookhart (1991, 36) involving the grading practices of 30 elementary teachers showed that teachers frequently assign a 'hodgepodge grade of attitude, effort, and achievement'. A subsequent investigation by Brookhart (1993) on the meaning that teachers give to grades further supported the considerable influence that value judgments had on grades. The results indicated that while average or above-average students would receive the grade they earned, low-ability students would get a break if they demonstrated effort. Passing grades were awarded to low-ability students who tried hard, but whose numerical grades indicated failure. The implication was that a grade reflected effort as well as ability.

Studies of secondary teachers' grading practices further indicate that teachers have varied approaches to assigning grades. For example, Stiggins, Frisbie and Griswold (1989), in an analysis of grading practices to set recommendations for the Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of students, found that a majority of teachers used grades to reflect both achievement and effort; they also set different levels of expectation based on each student's ability level. Similarly, results from a large, national sample of secondary school teachers (teachers of students in Grades 6–12, ages 11–18, $n = 2293$) demonstrated that the factors teachers used in assigning grades were a combination of academic achievement, academic enablers (e.g. effort, improvement, participation), external benchmarks, extra credit for borderline cases, graded homework and non-graded homework (McMillan 2001).

Family background factors

Many studies have attributed differences in academic achievement to students' family background characteristics such as socio-economic status, maternal education, parental employment and family structure (e.g. Ferriss 2006; Hauser and Warren 1997; Sirin 2005). It is well-established that socio-economic status is one of

the most important demographic factors related to children's development. Parents who are active in the workforce are better able to provide the resources and supports needed for their children. Additionally, parental education is positively related to income, as higher education enables access to better-paid jobs. In particular, maternal education plays a significant role in shaping children's development and academic outcomes (e.g. DeGarmo, Martinez, Jr and Forgatch 1999; Hilton, Desrochers and Devall 2001; O'Connor and McCartney 2007). Furthermore, children growing up in homes with two adult figures tend to have better developmental and academic outcomes than their peers living in single-adult households (Thomson, Hanson and McLanahan 1994). They are likely to have access to greater resources, as two adults can more easily invest sufficient resources, time and attention for children's well-being than a single parent (Gibson-Davis 2008; Thomson, Hanson and McLanahan 1994).

Gender and classroom behaviour

Furthermore, teachers' grading practices may be influenced, albeit indirectly or even inadvertently, by student characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status. For instance, girls tend to be more well-behaved, quiet and compliant than boys (Reay 2006). Some have argued that girls outperform boys because most traditional classes favour girls' learning styles, as they require lengthy periods of concentration or quiet seatwork and seldom involve kinaesthetic or hands-on activities that better suit boys' learning styles (Gurian 2001; Gurian and Stevens 2007; Sax 2005). Therefore, girls generally may be perceived to be better students than boys and thus be awarded with grades that are higher than those based solely on their academic skills. Additionally, teachers often report that immigrant students are more attentive, docile, hardworking and respectful of authority than their native-born peers (Qin-Hillard 2003; Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hillard 2004); thus, teachers may reward immigrant youth by giving them better grades than those reflective of the students' actual attainment in a course.

Clearly, the evidence offered in the existing literature suggests that teachers take a variety of factors into consideration when assigning grades. While tests and objective measures of achievement are typically used to evaluate students' performance in a course and weighed most significantly in assigning grades, other variables play a part in the awarding of grades. Furthermore, teachers have different reasons for taking into account factors such as effort, conduct and homework. They may use grades partially to reward students who behave well and facilitate classroom management, or conversely, to punish students who are disruptive in class. They may also view grades as a means of encouraging or motivating students to try hard, to be involved in classroom learning activities, and to take responsibility for completing the assigned homework. Thus, in sum, teacher evaluation and grading practices are varied and guided by different motivations.

Homework

Brief history of homework in schools in the USA

Homework has been the subject of much debate in the USA, and general attitudes toward homework have fluctuated over time, largely influenced by contemporary

socio-political issues. Before the twentieth century, homework was viewed as an important means of developing disciplined minds in children (Reese 1995). The progressive education movement in the early twentieth century, however, denounced the routine of drill, memorisation and recitation that had been formerly enforced in schooling, as it was seen as a threat to children's physical and mental health (Gill and Schlossman 1996). In the 1950s, the progressive education movement was replaced by a movement focused on academic excellence and higher standards. Education and homework in particular were conceived as critical means of competing with other nations (Gill and Schlossman 2000, 2004). Thus, positive attitudes toward homework returned by the 1960s, and reformers sought to integrate the traditional drill- or recitation-type homework with principles of progressive education by assigning homework that was academically oriented, yet enjoyable, experiential and individualised (Gill and Schlossman 2004). The 1980s brought about another movement to raise educational standards, spurred by the publication of *A nation at risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983) that highlighted threats from economic competitors around the world, and United States Department of Education's *What works* (1986), which staunchly advocated homework among its pedagogical recommendations. Since then, homework has been widely viewed as a critical tool to build academic skills and character traits, as well as in its role in advancing America's competitiveness in the global economy.

Typical homework practices in current schools in the USA

As can be gleaned from the brief historical account of the role homework has played in American schools, homework continues to be an important part of students' academic lives in schools in the USA. In recent years, efforts to increase accountability for student achievement in US schools have been spurred by the passage of various legislation and policy initiatives (e.g. No Child Left Behind Act, United States Congress 2002). Schools are now held accountable for ensuring that all children, including English language learners and students with disabilities, make adequate progress towards achieving standards that are aligned with the general curriculum (Carter and Kennedy 2006). In this climate, teachers often view homework as a critical tool to improve academic achievement for students, as it provides students with increased learning opportunities and encourages them to review materials taught in class. For many, the increased time devoted to academic work results in improved skills and achievement. Indeed, research on homework conducted during the past two decades consistently indicates positive effect of homework on achievement as measured by tests and class grades (Cooper, Robinson and Patall 2006). Furthermore, the most frequently reported reason for giving homework is that it has immediate effects on achievement by increasing the time students spend on academic tasks, thereby helping them retain knowledge and develop increased understanding of course materials (Cooper, Robinson and Patall 2006).

In addition, a compilation of interviews and surveys with elementary and secondary teachers in the US indicate that homework assignments serve multiple instructional and non-instructional purposes, suggesting the importance of homework in youths' education and development (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001). Teachers report giving homework not only to make students practise the materials taught in class, but also to help them prepare for larger projects and/or for

subsequent lessons, to encourage students to be actively involved in their learning, and/or to help develop students' character, such as sense of responsibility, perseverance, time management and self-confidence (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001). Teachers also use homework to foster school-related discussions between parents and children, to inform parents about materials their children are learning at school, to encourage students to collaborate and motivate each other, to fulfil school or district policy, to publicise schools' academic rigor, and to correct students' behaviour or productivity (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001). Many of these purposes target students' skills, engagement and family-school connections, all of which have been identified in research as factors associated with academic achievement (Snow et al. 1991). Furthermore, recent fieldwork with high school teachers suggest that homework is often used to assess the extent to which students have grasped target skills and content, so that teachers may plan subsequent lessons accordingly.

While extensive research has been conducted on homework in the lives of native-born students, research on immigrant students' experiences with homework is scarce. Yet immigrant adolescents are among students who might potentially benefit from the greater learning opportunities offered by homework. Many immigrant youth lag behind their native-born English-speaking peers in academic achievement, and one way of bridging this achievement gap may be through the use of homework. As many are learning English and complex academic subjects simultaneously, it seems likely that immigrant students could gain from the additional learning opportunities provided through homework to practise, review and reinforce their lessons.

Although homework may contribute to improving immigrant youth's academic performance, it may also hinder teacher evaluations of their immigrant students, as failure to submit completed quality homework can negatively bias teachers' assessment of students' skills. Immigrant students may fail to complete assignments because of limited English proficiency, inadequate academic skills and unfamiliarity with the types of assignments and homework expectations of school teachers in the USA. Furthermore, their parents, many of which do not speak the language of the host country, may have limited education or may work night shifts, and may have limited capacity to help their children in completing homework in the same way as their middle-class peers (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova 2008). Given evidence suggesting that homework may be particularly beneficial for immigrant youth (Annunziata et al. 2006; Aspiazu, Bauer and Spillett 1998), and given the possibility that failure to complete homework may create negative biases in teachers toward their immigrant students, more research is needed on how homework impacts immigrant youth's achievement. The present study thus addresses this gap in literature by examining the role of homework in teacher evaluations of immigrant youth and by determining the extent to which grades are indicators of students' course understanding, language proficiency, behavioural engagement, and homework completion.

Present study

The existing evidence indicates the need to examine effects of a wide variety of factors that may influence immigrant students' grades, including English proficiency, understanding of course materials, homework completion and engagement in school. The current study focuses particularly on the effects of homework in determining immigrant adolescents' grades and course understanding. Specifically, it examines

whether the effect of homework completion on grades and course understanding is moderated by students' English language proficiency. Thus, the research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

- (1) (a) Is homework completion associated with immigrant students' academic achievement indicated by grades?
(b) Does the effect of homework completion on grades vary as a function of immigrant students' English language proficiency?
- (2) (a) Is homework completion associated with immigrant students' course understanding?
(b) Does the effect of homework completion on course understanding vary as a function of immigrant students' English language proficiency?

Method

Participants

This study utilises data from the final year (2002) of the LISA study (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova 2008), which was a five-year study that used interdisciplinary and comparative approaches, mixed-methods and triangulated data in order to document patterns of adaptation among 408 recently-arrived immigrant youth from Central America,¹ China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Mexico. With funding from the National Science Foundation, the W. T. Grant Foundation and the Spencer Foundation in the USA, this research initiative was established as the Harvard Immigration Project at Harvard Graduate School of Education where the co-principal investigators, Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, were based as faculty members.

The research team recruited students from seven public school districts in the USA from Massachusetts and California. These school districts in the Boston and San Francisco areas had high densities of newcomer immigrant students, and participating schools provided access to students, teachers, staff and school records. With the help of school personnel, youth who potentially met the inclusion criteria (newcomer immigrants whose parents were both from the same country of origin) were identified. Yet due to the specific inclusion criteria of the study, the need for signed permission forms from school personnel and parents, and the required commitment of five years of participation, the recruitment extended to over 50 different schools. Furthermore, by the final year of the study, these students were dispersed across over 150 schools, both because of normative developmental school transitions and because immigrant students are highly mobile.

At recruitment, participants had spent at least two-thirds of their lives in their country of origin and spoke a native language other than English. They were between the ages of nine and 14 during the first year of the study, with a mean recruitment age of 11.8. During recruitment, attempts were made to stratify each group equally by gender, but girls comprised slightly more than half (53%) of the final sample.

By the fifth year of the study (academic year 2001–02), the sample size was 309, with a low attrition rate of about 5% annually. The final year LISA sample included 57 Central American, 72 Chinese, 60 Dominican, 50 Haitian and 70 Mexican youth. A comparison of the original sample and the sample used for the present study

indicated no significant differences by country of origin ($\chi^2_{(4)} = 6.34, p = 0.18$), but there were significant differences by gender, with more girls being represented in the final sample than boys ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 7.10, p = 0.008$).

The present study is a secondary analysis of a subset of the data collected in the LISA study; this analysis focuses on factors associated with teachers' evaluations of immigrant students. The variables used in analyses of the present study are those from behaviour checklists completed by teachers on each student, in addition to students' report cards and demographic information collected through structured interviews with students and parents. A total of 57 teachers completed the checklists. Preliminary analyses of the data for the final year sample of students ($n = 309$) showed that 36 students (11.65%) had missing data. A case-by-case analysis of the 36 students with missing data is needed, but comparisons were made between the fifth year sample of 309 and the sample of 273 students (88.35%) for whom all data were available; there were no significant differences on any of the independent variables used in the regression analyses of the present study. Furthermore, examinations of the data at the variable level showed that all variables had less than 5% missing values (the highest was 4.70% for parental employment), indicating that the missing data are ignorable (McKnight et al. 2007). Thus, a listwise deletion method was used, resulting in a sample of 273 students with complete data. Since LISA was not designed to include a representative sample of immigrant youth in the USA or in the states of Massachusetts or California where the study was conducted, no claims are made about the generalisability of its findings to the larger immigrant youth population.

Measures

Grades

School report cards were gathered for each participant during each year of the study. An academic grade point average was calculated averaging the grades for mathematics, science, language arts and social studies courses.

Teacher student checklist

Two teachers of each participant were asked each year to complete a one-page checklist developed for the study. This checklist asked teachers to report on their students' classroom behaviours, academic skills and the frequency with which students completed and turned in homework.

From the teacher checklist, a measure called *Classroom Behaviours* was created from a six-item scale designed to determine the quality of behaviours such as students' attention, motivation/effort, asking questions, attendance, classroom behaviour and punctuality. Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from 'very poor' to 'very good' (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$).

Course understanding

This variable was derived from a question asking teachers to assess their students' level of understanding in a course, in other words, their academic skills in the course. Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from 'poor' to 'excellent'.

Homework completion

This variable was derived from a question asking teachers to report the consistency with which their students turned in completed homework. Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from ‘never’ to ‘always’.

English language proficiency

The *Bilingual Verbal Ability Test* (BVAT; Muñoz-Sandoval et al. 1998) was used to measure English language proficiency. The standardised English proficiency score indicated student’s performance on three subsections of the test: picture vocabulary, oral vocabulary, and verbal analogies. The BVAT has been normed on all of the languages represented in the study. The BVAT manual (Muñoz-Sandoval et al. 1998, 68) reports the median reliability across age groups for the English proficiency scale as 0.96.

Demographic variables

Data about family composition, maternal education and parental employment were derived from the parent interview of the final year of the study. These variables were dummy-coded. Students from families with two parental figures (including stepparents) were assigned a value of 0, and students from single-parent families were assigned a value of 1. Maternal education indicated whether a student’s mother completed high school education (1) or not (0). Parental employment indicated that at least one parent in the family was active in the workforce (1) or not (0).

Gender

Student gender was dummy-coded such that male was assigned a value of 0 and female a value of 1.

Results*Descriptive analyses*

Descriptive statistics for Grades, Course understanding, Homework completion and Class behaviours are displayed in Table 1. The distributions of these variables are also represented in Figures 1–4. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for other variables of interest in the study; Figure 5 shows the distribution of students’ English language proficiency scores. To examine the relationships between variables indicating teacher evaluations of students, English language proficiency and demographic variables, a correlation analysis was performed. Table 3 shows the correlations of study variables.

Regression models

We used multiple regression, a customary technique to account for the variance in an outcome variable (here, grades) based on linear combinations of continuous and dichotomous predictor variables. Multiple regression is a useful method, which can establish that a set of predictors, or independent variables, explains a proportion of

Table 1. Descriptives of grades, course understanding, homework completion, and class behaviours ($n = 273$).

Variable	Mean rating (SD)	Rating	Number of students	Percentage of students
Grades (average of individual student's grades collected from school report cards in four content area subjects: English, maths, science, social studies)	3.03 (1.10)	5 (Excellent)	46	17
		4 (Very good)	75	27
		3 (Good)	83	30
		2 (Fair)	55	20
		1 (Poor)	14	5
Course understanding* (teacher evaluation of individual student's understanding of course contents)	3.31 (1.37)	5 (Excellent)	68	25
		4 (Very good)	75	27
		3 (Good)	39	14
		2 (Fair)	57	21
		1 (Poor)	34	12
Homework completion* (teacher report of individual student's homework completion)	3.85 (1.24)	5 (Always)	109	40
		4 (Almost always)	82	30
		3 (Occasionally)	24	9
		2 (Seldom)	44	16
		1 (Never)	14	5
Class behaviours* (teacher evaluation of individual student's behaviours in class)	4.33 (0.89)	5 (Very good)	131	48
		4 (Good)	72	26
		3 (Okay)	37	14
		2 (Poor)	22	8
		1 (Very poor)	11	4

Note: *Responses provided on checklists completed by a total of 57 teachers.

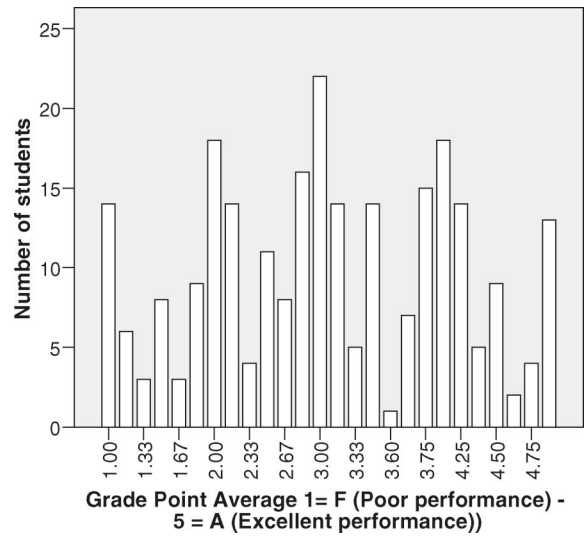


Figure 1. Distribution of students' grades ($n = 273$).

the variance in a dependent variable at a significant level. This conclusion can be drawn through a significance test of R^2 , or multiple correlation, which is the percentage of variance in the dependent variable that is explained collectively by all

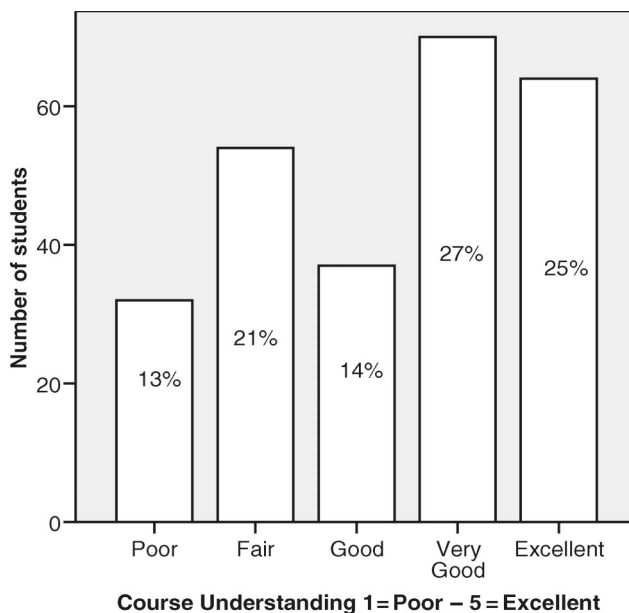


Figure 2. Teacher evaluation of students' course understanding (number of teachers = 57; number of students evaluated = 273).

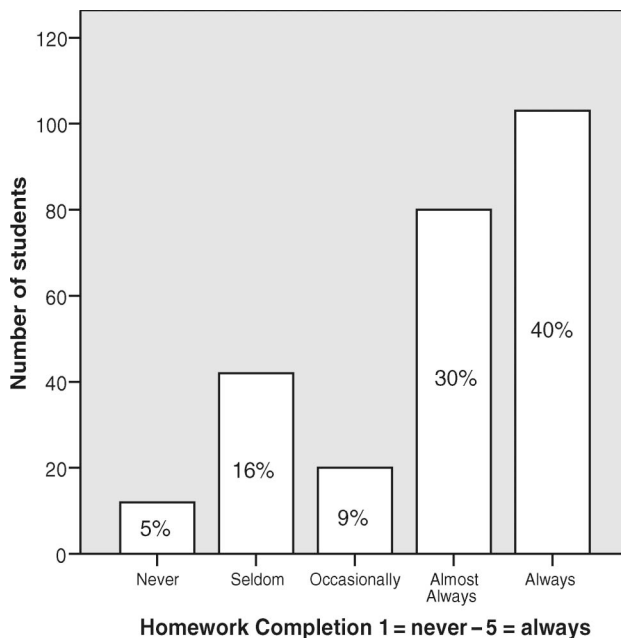


Figure 3. Teacher report of students' homework completion (number of teachers = 57; number of students evaluated = 273).

of the independent variables in a model. By testing the difference of two values of R^2 , one can assess whether the addition of an independent variable to a model contributes significantly in predicting the dependent variable. Multiple regression

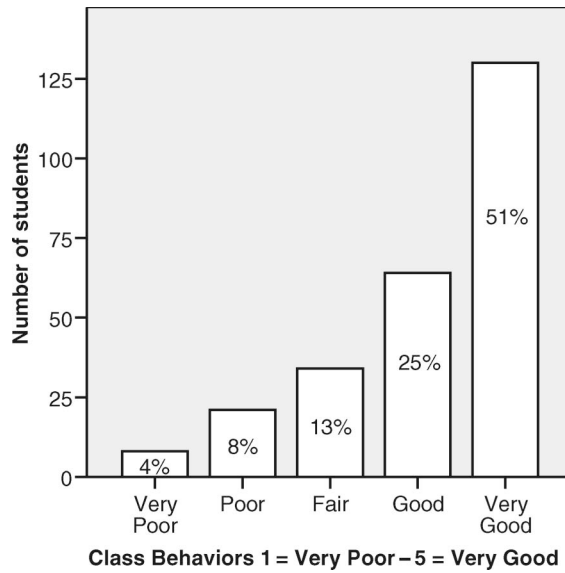


Figure 4. Teacher evaluation of students' class behaviours (number of teachers = 57; number of students evaluated = 273).

Table 2. Descriptives of other predictor variables used in the study ($n = 273$).

Variables	Mean (SD) or percentage of student participants with corresponding characteristics
English proficiency (score from the Bilingual Verbal Ability Test)	74.43 (18.37)
Family composition (two-adult household)	68%
Maternal education (mother who completed secondary schooling)	34%
Parental employment (parental figure who is active in the workforce)	66%
Gender of student participants (female)	57%

can also establish the relative predictive importance of the independent variables by comparing the coefficients, or standardised beta weights (referred to hereafter as betas), associated with each predictor. *T*-tests are used to assess the significance of individual betas; if the *t*-test (indicated hereafter as *ts*) is significant at the $p = 0.05$ level, one can reject the null hypothesis that the regression coefficient is zero. Specifically, we used hierarchical regression analyses, a method that permits the researchers to determine, based on theory, the order in which predictor variables are entered in building a model (Garson 2008).

Predicting grades

To address research question 1a (*Is homework completion associated with immigrant students' academic achievement indicated by grades?*), a hierarchical regression model

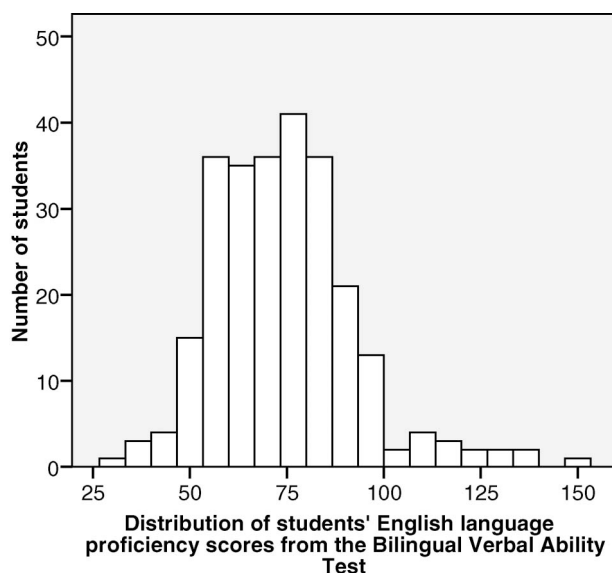


Figure 5. Distribution of students' English proficiency scores from the Bilingual Verbal Ability Test ($n = 273$).

was specified in which Grades was regressed on three blocks of predictor variables identified in the literature as important factors associated with students' grades. The three blocks of predictors were demographic variables, indicators of academic skills and indicators of academic behaviours (Table 4). The demographic variables block included student gender, whether student's mother completed secondary education, whether one of the parents was employed and whether the student came from a home with two parental figures (Model 1). The block with indicators of academic skills included students' level of course understanding and students' English language proficiency score (Model 2). The block with indicators of academic behaviours included students' class behaviours and frequency of homework completion (Model 3).

An examination of standardised beta coefficients revealed that in Model 1, *Gender* ($\beta = 0.27$, $t = 4.49$, $p < 0.001$) and *Maternal education* ($\beta = 0.12$, $t = 2.01$, $p < 0.05$) were positively associated with *Grades*, jointly explaining about 16% of the variance. Model 2 showed that when academic skills variables were entered, *Gender* ($\beta = 0.26$, $t = 4.91$, $p < 0.001$), *Parental employment* ($\beta = 0.16$, $t = 4.91$, $p < 0.05$), *Course understanding* ($\beta = 0.26$, $t = 4.53$, $p < 0.001$), and *English proficiency* ($\beta = 0.29$, $t = 5.02$, $p < 0.001$) were positively associated with *Grades*, collectively explaining about 35% of the variance. Finally, Model 3 showed that when academic behaviours variables were entered, *Gender* ($\beta = 0.16$, $t = 3.01$, $p < 0.01$), *Parental employment* ($\beta = 0.16$, $t = 2.21$, $p < 0.05$), *English proficiency* ($\beta = 0.28$, $t = 5.07$, $p < 0.001$) and *Homework completion* ($\beta = 0.31$, $t = 3.92$, $p < 0.001$) emerged as significant predictors of *Grades*, collectively accounting for about 43% of the variance. Multicollinearity, which occurs when variables are so highly correlated with each other that they are essentially measuring the same construct, was not a problem in any of the models, indicating that each of the independent variable in our specified model contributes a unique phenomenon in

Table 3. Correlations for the study variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Grades	1								
2. Homework completion	0.53**	1							
3. Class behaviours	0.49**	0.76***	1						
4. Course understanding	0.39**	0.49***	0.59***	1					
5. English proficiency	0.39**	0.18**	0.24***	0.31***	1				
6. Gender	0.27**	0.29***	0.24***	0.14**	-0.06	1			
7. Family composition	0.23**	0.18**	0.16**	0.02	0.14*	-0.08	1		
8. Maternal education	0.15*	0.12*	0.10	0.06	0.25***	0.07	0.09	1	
9. Parental employment	0.25**	0.09	0.07	-0.05	0.15*	-0.06	0.70***	-0.02	1

Note: This analysis included students for whom there was complete data: $n = 273$. (Gender: male = 0, female = 1; Family Composition: two parental figures = 0; one parental figure = 1; Maternal education: mother completed HS = 1, mother did not complete HS = 0; Parental employment: parent employed = 1, parent not employed = 0). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.0001$.

predicting the outcome variable, in our case, students' grades. A formal test of multicollinearity produces tolerance statistics associated with each independent variable, and in general, a statistic lower than 0.20 suggests the presence of multicollinearity. In our analyses, tolerance statistics ranged from 0.59 to 0.97, confirming the absence of multicollinearity (Berry 1993).

When the variables indicating academic behaviours (*Homework completion* and *Class behaviours*) were entered in Model 3, *Course understanding*, a significant predictor in Model 2, became non-significant, indicating that academic behaviours such as completing and submitting homework were stronger predictors of *Grades* than understanding of course materials. To determine the unique contribution of *Homework completion* to *Grades* while controlling for other factors associated with *Grades*, a regression model was specified, in which *Grades* was regressed on two blocks of predictor variables (Table 5). The first block included the predictors that were found to be significant in Model 3 (*Gender*, *Parental employment* and *English*

Table 4. Standardized beta coefficients for hierarchical regression model predicting *Grades* based on demographics (*Gender*, *Maternal education*, *Parental employment*, *Family composition*), academic skills (*Course understanding*, *English proficiency*) and academic behaviours (*Homework completion*, *Class behaviour*).

Block and variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Block 1			
Gender	0.27***	0.26***	0.16**
Maternal education	0.12*	0.04	0.02
Parental employment	0.15	0.16*	0.16*
Family composition	0.15	0.10	0.04
Block 2			
Course understanding		0.26***	0.08
English proficiency		0.29***	0.28***
Block 3			
Homework completion			0.31***
Class behaviours			0.07
R^2	0.16	0.35	0.43
ΔR^2		0.27	0.08

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 5. Standardized beta coefficients for hierarchical regression model predicting *Grades* based on *Gender*, *Parental Employment*, *English Proficiency*, and *Homework Completion*.

Block and variables	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Block 1			
Gender	0.28***	0.51***	0.17***
Parental employment	0.27***	0.21***	0.18***
Block 2			
English proficiency		0.39***	0.31***
Block 3			
Homework completion			0.40***
R^2	0.14	0.29	0.43
ΔR^2		0.15	0.14

Note: * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

proficiency), and the second block included *Homework completion* (Model 6). This analysis revealed that *Gender* (beta = 0.17, $t = 3.30$, $p = 0.001$), *Parental employment* (beta = 0.18, $t = 3.65$, $p < 0.001$) and *English proficiency* (beta = 0.31, $t = 6.04$, $p < 0.001$) collectively explained about 29% of *Grades* (Model 5), and that *Homework completion* (beta = 0.40, $t = 7.56$, $p < 0.001$) alone accounted for an additional 14% of the variance in *Grades*.

Testing moderation by English proficiency

To address research question 1b (*Does the effect of homework completion on grades vary as a function of immigrant students' English language proficiency?*), which involved examining whether the effect of homework completion on grades is dependent on students' English proficiency, another hierarchical regression model was specified, in which *Grades* was regressed on two blocks of predictor variables (Table 6). The first block included the variables that emerged as significant predictors of *Grades* in Model 6 (*Gender*, *Parental employment*, *English proficiency* and *Homework completion*). The second block included an interaction term, *Homework completion* \times *English proficiency*, which was calculated using centred variables to avoid possible problems with multicollinearity, following the guidelines provided by Baron and Kenny (1986) (Model 8). The interaction term *Homework completion* \times *English proficiency* was non-significant in predicting *Grades* (beta = 0.08, $t = 1.51$, $p > 0.10$), indicating that the effect of *Homework completion* on *Grades* was independent of students' *English proficiency*.

Predicting an alternative to grades

The finding that *Grades* were determined primarily by *Homework completion* and *English proficiency* and not by *Course understanding* was unexpected. The implication was that *Grades* were not indicative of students' level of understanding the course materials. Thus, a follow-up question was posed: What are the significant predictors of *Course understanding*? While *Grades* was one indicator of student achievement, *Course understanding* was another variable that captured teacher evaluations of student achievement.

Table 6. Standardized beta coefficients for hierarchical regression model examining whether the influence of *Homework completion* on *Grades* is moderated by *English proficiency*.

Block and variables	Model 7	Model 8
Block 1		
Gender	0.17***	0.07***
Parental employment	0.18***	0.18***
English proficiency	0.31***	0.28***
Homework completion	0.40***	0.42***
Block 2		
Homework completion \times English proficiency		0.08
R^2	0.425	0.43
ΔR^2		0.05

Note: * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

In order to address the above question, i.e. research question 2a (*Is homework completion associated with immigrant students' course understanding?*), a hierarchical regression model was specified in which *Course understanding* was regressed on three blocks of the same predictor variables included in the models predicting *Grades*. The first block included demographics (*Gender*, *Maternal education*, *Parental employment* and *Family composition*), the second block included academic skills (*English proficiency*) and the third block included academic behaviours (*Homework completion* and *Class behaviours*) (Table 7). In a model including solely demographic variables (Model 9), none was found to be significant predictors of *Course understanding*. However, when an indicator of academic skills, *English proficiency*, was entered in Model 10, *Gender* (beta = 0.14, $t = 2.29$, $p < 0.05$), *Parental employment* (beta = -0.21, $t = -2.49$, $p = 0.05$) and *English proficiency* (beta = 0.35, $t = 5.60$, $p < 0.001$) emerged as significant predictors of *Course understanding*, collectively explaining about 15% of the variance. Finally, when academic behaviours variables *Homework completion* and *Class behaviours* were entered in Model 11, *Parental employment* (beta = -0.14, $t = -1.96$, $p = 0.05$), *English proficiency* (beta = 0.21, $t = 3.86$, $p < 0.001$) and *Class behaviours* (beta = 0.45, $t = 5.65$, $p < 0.001$) were found to be significant predictors of *Course understanding*, accounting for about 41% of the variance. In this final model, *Homework completion* only approached significance as a predictor (beta = 0.14, $t = 1.80$, $p = 0.07$). The explanatory power of *Homework completion* was absorbed by *Class behaviours*, as the two variables were highly correlated ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$).

This analysis was further examined to determine whether the effect of *Homework completion* or *Class behaviours* on *Course understanding* was moderated by *English proficiency*. To answer research question 2b (*Does the effect of homework completion on course understanding vary as a function of immigrant students' English language proficiency?*), the interaction terms *Homework completion* \times *English proficiency* and *Class behaviours* \times *English proficiency* were created using centred predictor variables, and each interaction was tested separately. Hierarchical regression models

Table 7. Standardized beta coefficients for hierarchical regression model predicting *Course understanding* based on demographics (*Gender*, *Maternal education*, *Parental employment*, *Family composition*), English language proficiency (*English proficiency*) and academic behaviours (*Homework completion*, *Class behaviour*).

Block and variables	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11
Block 1			
Gender	0.11	0.14*	-0.03
Maternal education	0.05	-0.04	-0.04
Parental employment	-0.17	-0.21*	-0.14*
Family composition	0.17	0.16	0.02
Block 2			
English proficiency		0.35***	0.21***
Block 3			
Homework completion			0.14
Class behaviours			0.45***
R^2	0.03	0.15	0.41
ΔR^2		0.12	0.26

Note: * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

were specified, in which *Course understanding* was regressed on two blocks of predictor variables. The first block included the variables that were found to be significant predictors of *Course understanding* in Model 11 (*Parental employment*, *English proficiency*, *Class behaviours*), along with *Homework completion* (required due to its presence in the interaction term); the second block included an interaction term (Table 8). One of the interactions, *Homework completion* \times *English proficiency* (beta = 0.17, $t = 2.56$, $p = 0.05$) was found to be significant in predicting *Course understanding*, indicating that the effect of *Homework completion* on *Course understanding* was dependent on students' *English proficiency*.

Indeed, a graph of this interaction (Figure 6) showed that students who completed homework generally achieved a higher level of *Course understanding* than

Table 8. Standardized beta coefficients for hierarchical regression model examining whether the influence of *Homework completion* on *Course understanding* is moderated by *English proficiency*.

Block and variables	Model 12	Model 13
Block 1		
Parental employment	-0.12*	-0.12*
English proficiency	0.20***	0.19***
Class behaviours	0.46***	0.45***
Homework completion	0.13	0.02
Block 2		
Homework completion \times English proficiency		0.17*
R^2	0.40	0.42
ΔR^2		0.02

Note: * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

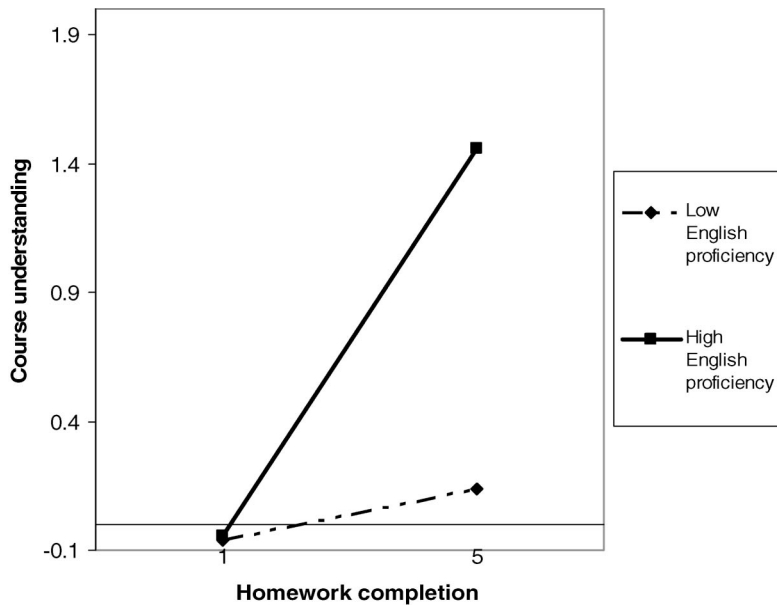


Figure 6. Relationship of *Homework completion* \times *English proficiency* on *Course understanding*.

their peers who did not consistently complete homework. However, the positive effect of *Homework completion* on *Course understanding* varied as a function of *English proficiency*. Among students with high *English proficiency*, completing homework seemed to have a significant positive association with their level of *Course understanding*. Yet among students with lower *English proficiency*, doing homework appeared to have little positive association with their level of *Course understanding*.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the role of homework completion, as well as English language proficiency, academic skills and classroom behavioural engagement in predicting immigrant students' grades. Our findings are consistent with other studies of native-born students, which have demonstrated the important role of completing homework on grades and achievement (Cooper, Robinson and Patall 2006). Interestingly, for newcomer immigrant students, teachers appeared to place the greatest emphasis on whether students complete and submit their homework as they assign grades. Completing homework was even more important in predicting grades than students' English language proficiency or teacher appraisals of course understanding and classroom behavioural engagement. Even while controlling for the effects of other factors associated with grades, homework completion emerged as the most significant predictor of grades.

While whether students completed and turned in their homework was the single best predictor of their grades, their English language proficiency also contributed significantly to the grades students received. In addition, English proficiency appeared to largely determine teacher evaluations of students' mastery of course materials. Teachers, when determining students' level of understanding in a course, seemed to focus primarily on the students' language abilities or, more precisely, on proficiency in English. Yet for the purposes of assigning grades, students' actual understanding of the course materials appeared to be of little importance relative to their English language proficiency. Therefore, English skills seemed to overshadow teacher perceptions of other academic skills in determining immigrant students' grades.

Previous research has demonstrated that English language learners need on average 7–10 years of consistent exposure and quality instruction (Cummins 1979; Hakuta, Goto Butler and Witt 2000) to acquire the academic language proficiency required to perform competitively with native English-speaking peers. Although by the final year of this study, many of the students had been in the USA long enough to have acquired academic language proficiency, the majority were attending low-performing, segregated schools where the quality of instruction and language exposure was far from optimal (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova 2008). The students' opportunity to attain the English language proficiency needed to achieve good grades was restricted; thus, basing their grades heavily on their English skills appears to unfairly penalise them.

Having established that whether a student did their homework was so highly predictive of their assigned grades, we then examined whether the effect of students' homework completion on grades was dependent on their English proficiency. We learned that the effect of homework completion on grades did *not* vary as a function of English proficiency. This finding suggests that teachers placed the same emphasis on homework completion regardless of a student's ability to perform academic tasks

in English. We can speculate that teachers tended to reward students' efforts rather than the quality or correctness of the assignment completed by their students. It may also be that teachers assigned homework to encourage students to develop the habit of continuing to learn outside of the class rather than to evaluate them based on how well they did the work. Thus, further research should examine the purposes and factors that teachers take into consideration when they design homework assignments given to their immigrant students.

Implications for practice

The findings from this study indicate that rather than an objective assessment of overall skill or mastery of the class material, grades assigned to immigrant students are largely determined by whether they do their homework and their English language proficiency. The study findings also show that teacher evaluation of students' course understanding is largely determined by students' English language proficiency, classroom behaviours and homework completion. It seems likely that teachers had greater confidence in evaluating a student's level of course understanding if the student was able to produce oral or written work in proficient academic English. Further research is thus needed to develop methods to assist teachers in assessing students' understanding of course materials while the students are in the process of acquiring academic English proficiency.

This study further suggests that there are numerous challenges that newcomer immigrant youth face, given their need to master English while concurrently acquiring the skills and credits necessary to complete high school (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix and Clewell 2001). Furthermore, many immigrant students do not have many of the supports at home that middle-class students have readily at hand, such as educated parents or tutors who can help them to organise essays and proof-read them, or a computer with Internet access. Recognising impediments to completing homework in this population and providing accommodations so that immigrant students are not unfairly penalised is an important first step. Then, assigned homework should be designed to build upon skills that were first developed in class, and it makes good sense to provide after-school homework programmes that are amply staffed and housed in well-equipped classrooms or libraries.

Relying heavily on homework to determine students' grades might send the wrong signal. In this sample of immigrant students, teacher-assigned grades were not simply an objective assessment of students' understanding of course content and skills acquired in the course. Teachers appeared to reward students who behave well and complete their homework by giving them better grades even though some of the students may have lacked the academic skills that good grades are intended to indicate. Thus, teachers may inadvertently communicate low expectations by giving good grades to students who are compliant with the task of doing homework, but are submitting low-quality work or have not mastered the class content (Weinstein 2002). Some students may interpret the grade as a sign of the teacher's belief that they are not capable of producing the high-quality work that would actually merit such a mark. Although limited English proficiency inevitably hinders immigrant students' ability to perform academically and do their homework, these students should be held to high, yet attainable levels of performance when given appropriate

scaffolding (Weinstein 2002). Criteria for high performance should be explicitly communicated to all students, and teachers should distinguish between effort and skill and provide separate feedback for each of these dimensions. Providing separate grades that distinguish feedback for effort from that for skills would be a fair way to deal with this issue for immigrant students who are in the process of acquiring a new language.

Limitations and future research

This was an exploratory, secondary analysis of data drawn from the final year of the LISA study. The focus of the original study was the adaptation of immigrant students, which included but was not specifically focused on teacher evaluations or grading practices of immigrant students. Moreover, while quantitative analyses can illuminate relationships between factors, they offer limited insight into how various factors operate in influencing teachers' evaluation of students. Future studies should incorporate qualitative methods such as classroom observations, in-depth teacher interviews and focus groups to enhance our understanding of the factors that affect teachers' grading of immigrant students. Research investigating the relative importance teachers attach to academic skills (e.g. ability, talent) versus academic enablers (e.g. effort, motivation, behavioural engagement) (DiPerna, Volpe and Elliott 2001) could have implications on school grading policies and recommendations for the standards by which teachers assess their students. Furthermore, such research could help teachers develop heightened awareness of their tendency to place greater weight on certain factors when assigning grades to students.

More research with other newcomer immigrant groups not included in this study is also warranted. Future studies should consider a broader array of predictors of grades, including teacher expectations and dispositions as well as students' prior achievement and interpersonal skills. Moreover, it will be important to expand future studies to examine relationships between teachers' grading practices and characteristics of teacher education programmes, such as the type of pedagogical and content area courses that are required for certification, the length of student teaching or field experience, and relationships with teacher mentors and seasoned teachers in the profession. An enhanced understanding of these associations could inform teacher preparation programmes on which components of their training needs attention in order to produce competent, effective, fair teachers. Thus, additional studies of how specific factors shape teachers' grading practices and evaluation of immigrant students are called for in future research.

Furthermore, as homework completion emerged as an influential factor in determining immigrant students' grades, follow-up studies are currently being conducted to examine the factors that influence immigrant students' homework completion. By using mixed method strategies with students and teachers, these studies and others will shed light on specific facilitators and impediments to immigrant youths' homework experiences as well as teachers' perspectives on the factors that may impact their immigrant students' ability to complete homework.

Note

1. Central American countries represented were El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

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